

SERMON: The Joy of Jesus
TEXT: John 15:9-17

5-16-21

A few years ago, Pixar came out with another award-winning animated movie titled, *Inside Out*. My kids are big fans of Pixar and Disney and almost anything animated. They have made me a fan as well. But in the case of *Inside Out*, it's not one of my favorites. A very brief description of the movie says, "After [11-year-old] Riley is uprooted from her Midwest life and moved to San Francisco, her emotions - Joy, Fear, Anger, Disgust, and Sadness - conflict on how best to navigate a new city, house, and school."

You see, Riley's emotions are characters, so we see Riley from the outside and then we see what's going on inside with her emotions. Perhaps I was overthinking it, but as I watched I tried to make sure that the Anger character was always angry, the Fear character was always afraid, and so on. It became very confusing for me because these characters were really the ones who *controlled* those emotions in Riley rather than *personifying* them. So, as the emotions interacted and conflicted with one another, the lines blurred.

For example, the character Joy becomes *upset* because Sadness begins playing a bigger role at this point in Riley's life. In Joy's estimation, there is no

place for sadness. Thus, the conflict. But in my mind, if Joy is really pure Joy, then she should never be upset. Right?

Joy. I think we all could give an example of what joy looks like, or we could describe a situation that makes us feel joy. For me, you won't be surprised to know that I would describe meeting and holding my new grandson for the first time last weekend as absolute joy. Others might say that the delight of children on Christmas morning is a picture of joy. For a teenage girl, maybe joy comes when someone invites her to the prom, and then she finds the perfect dress *for free* from Semo Prom Mothers. A wedding is another occasion of joy. Maybe especially the wedding of a same-sex couple who never believed they would have a chance to wed. I think joy is the word I would choose to describe the opening scene from the *Sound of Music*, where Julie Andrews is singing and dancing through the green grass of the mountains outside the convent. I know a man who always expresses his joy when he goes camping with his dog in the beautiful Montana wilderness. And I saw on the news recently the joyful homecoming of a woman who has spent months in the hospital with COVID.

In today's scripture from the Gospel of John, Jesus is quoted using some form of the word *love* nine times in nine verses. So, you might be surprised to hear me preaching on THE JOY OF JESUS. But it's something I'd like to explore.

One Bible scholar pointed out how out of place the word joy is in this particular passage. These are some of Jesus' parting words to his disciples, yet Jesus offers statements of joy. "There's already been the acknowledgment of troubled hearts. And the next chapters will be words about rejection and hatred and abandonment, yet even more joy. *Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete.* (16:24) And later, *But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves.*" (Karoline Lewis, *Choose Joy*, www.workingpreacher.org, May 3, 2015)

"Joy appears misplaced in passages that deal primarily with Jesus' departure and impending death. Joy seems inappropriate when you are told that the one on whom you have relied for intimacy and belonging will no longer be around... Where is joy in the midst of the hardship Jesus described and in the peril that is sure to come? Where is joy when a primary source of your joy is leaving you? Where is joy when you need it the most? Jesus knows that the presence of joy

needs to be heard, needs to be felt, when you face things that assume and anticipate a profound absence of joy.” (Karoline Lewis, *Choose Joy*, www.workingpreacher.org, May 3, 2015)

This same theologian goes on to write more personally that joy has been elusive for her. She has found that “true joy is hard to come by and seems simply impossible when one starts down the road of real life.... Paradoxically, joy is hard. It takes work. It takes effort. It takes intention.” For herself, she has found that in order to find joy, she needs to pursue it. We all need to be reminded that joy can be present, “especially in the face of those who seek to steal your joy away.” (Karoline Lewis, *Choose Joy*, www.workingpreacher.org, May 3, 2015)

Furthermore, she explains that the Greek words for *joy* and *grace* share the same root. “Joy is that indescribable sense when you find yourself experiencing abundant grace.... It’s not an answer. It’s an affirmation. It’s the guarantee of God’s grace when all that is good seems so far away. It’s the security of God’s love when it appears that love is nowhere to be felt, especially from those you thought would love you. It’s the hope that even in the darkest places of separation, God’s abiding [in us] and our abiding in God is promised and present.” (Karoline Lewis, *Choose Joy*, www.workingpreacher.org, May 3, 2015)

Looking back at the gospel then, as Jesus anticipates his arrest, trial, and crucifixion, he is perhaps reminding himself as much as he is reminding his disciples that grace and love and joy are present. “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

Jesus is at this point coming to the realization - even though he has known all along - that he will soon be laying down his life because he loves his friends so much. And even though he may be leaving them, his love - the same love that Jesus and the Father share - will always remain. This love abides. Persists. Endures. Lives on. Lives in us. And is where we live.

This love is THE JOY OF JESUS. “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.”

Complete joy is knowing that the love of God never ends. This doesn't mean however, that we will never experience sadness or fear or anger. In fact, the more we allow ourselves to feel a wide variety of emotions, the deeper our joy will be.

I heard a beautiful story this week about a woman who went into the bakery to pick up a cake that she had ordered. When she took out her wallet to pay, the cashier simply pointed to a handwritten note that had been taped to the top of the box. It read, "Today is my son's 37th birthday, his 6th one in heaven. In memory of him, I paid for your cake. Please enjoy, make wonderful memories, and hug your baby tight (no matter how old he is). Love, Drew's Mom."

Drew's mom has known the greatest grief there is. To lose a child. The depth of her grief is equaled only by the depth of her love. Her son is gone, but her love for him will never end. And she has found joy by giving joy to someone else.

It is not surprising after all, that my focus on THE JOY OF JESUS brings us back to the familiar refrain of love. Complete joy comes from abiding in God's sacrificial and everlasting love. Complete joy comes from loving one another as Christ loves us. May we know love, may we share love, and may we find joy... to the glory of God! AMEN.